

## 5 Phases of Reunion

1. **Pre-entry** includes the days immediately preceding the reunion. It is usually a hectic period when soldiers complete equipment accountability and maintenance, and family members make preparations for their loved ones' return.
2. **Reunion** is a time of adjustment. It includes the immediate meeting, which may have been rescheduled several times, and ranges from a patriotic reunion ceremony to soldiers arriving home individually or unexpectedly in the middle of the night. This phase also includes the first few days after the soldier's arrival and often feels like a honeymoon. This is the time to celebrate signs of positive growth in yourself, your partner and your children.
3. **Disruption** occurs as problems surface and expectations of "normalcy" go unmet. Things to expect in this phase include jealousy, new desires for independence, concerns about trust, new routines, the return of unresolved issues and the need for new financial plans.
4. **Communication** is a time of renegotiating new routines, reconnecting, redefining family roles and decision-making.
5. **Normalcy** occurs when the family returns to a routine of sharing and caring. Things to accept in this phase are re-established routines and roles, new budgets and personal growth.

## Preparing for a Happy Reunion

LEARNING about reunion before redeployment can help prepare military families for successful homecoming. This seems to be true for couples both with and without children, single parents, and single soldiers coming back to family and friends. There is no way to predict what reunion will really be like, but one of the best ways to prepare is to develop a positive mindset.

**Expect doubts and worries.** Anxiety is a natural part of reunion.

**Forget your fantasies.** Give up fantasies or expectations because they may not happen. Let things happen naturally.

**Expect change.** You've changed, your spouse has changed and your children have changed. Accepting change is a major factor in re-establishing oneself and relationships after separation. People's tastes and interests may have changed. They may have different preferences in food and clothing, for example, different beliefs in politics and religion, or new thoughts about money and careers.

Remember that role changes are almost guaranteed during separation. A family member who learns about managing a home or working outside of it may find that they enjoy it and desire permanent changes upon the soldier's return. Additionally, a soldier may have acquired new job skills and added responsibilities during deployment.

In the weeks following the initial reunion, it's best to make small, gradual changes. Large or rapid changes in roles are often a shock for the whole family, even if there's an impatience for everything to happen at once.

Another big change may be money. Such costs as food and utility bills are higher with the service member at home, and pay may change, too. This is the time to create a realistic budget.

There is no definite period for change to begin to feel normal. On average, it takes several weeks or months, depending on the length of separation and on your ability to accept change.

Expect old problems to reappear. Even though it's nice to remember people at their best, separation usually doesn't solve problems. All the issues that existed before separation probably have not disappeared. There may even be new ones.

**Share your feelings.** Communication is key to a healthy reunion. Talk about your feelings and let your partner talk, too. Listen. Make sure you understand what your partner is saying before responding.

**Accept your partner's feelings.** Soldiers and family members may experience feelings that are difficult to comprehend. Part of accepting a person's feelings is listening to what's being said and watching body language, as well as having the patience to let the other person explain him or herself without interruption.

Recognizing that family members are proud of how they handled things alone will help soldiers understand the importance of accepting changes made during the separation. Family members should also realize that soldiers may be surprised or hurt that loved ones have coped so well alone. This is a good time to reassure the soldier that he or she is still loved and needed.

## Communication

CONTINUOUS communication during separation plays a critical role in maintaining an emotional bond between partners. Open, two-way communication lines will encourage soldiers and families to start sharing their expectations, concerns and fears about reunion. By communicating these things early, partners can acquire the information and skills needed to cross barriers and minimize problems during reunion. Basic points about communication:

- The message sent isn't always the message received. Our emotions can distort the message, especially when we're angry or upset.
- Feedback is a critical part of good communication. It helps the speaker feel heard and also helps guarantee that the message is not misunderstood. For example, a man might say to his wife, "When's dinner ready?" She hears, "You're late cooking; get busy!" What he meant was, "I'm really looking forward to dinner with you."
- Verbal and nonverbal communication are equally important. Body language, in fact, may show more than a person is willing to say verbally. Walking in the door, sitting down and watching TV without saying anything is still communicating, for example. Also, a person's voice can betray emotions if words and tone don't match.
- Men and women sometimes communicate differently.
- We sometimes talk or think our way into being angrier about a situation than we need to be.
- For example, we may resort to labeling or name calling — categorizing someone in a negative manner while forgetting his or her positive traits. We may think we can mind-read and assume we know why a person acts a certain way, even believing they were just trying to hurt us.
- We may make "should" statements, translating preferences into demands

## **Roadblocks to Communication**

MEANINGFUL communication requires effort. If there is a problem in communication or there are feelings of anger, hurt or confusion, the communication may become increasingly strained. Conflict may arise from the way people say things, or the words people use may cause others to stop listening. To become a good listener:

- Stop talking and do not interrupt;
- Get rid of distractions;
- Make eye contact with the other person;
- Concentrate on the message being sent;
- Listen “between the lines” by watching body language and tone of voice.

Feedback reflects the message, as you understand it after you have listened at the deepest level you can. Paraphrasing and asking questions can avoid misinterpretation and conflict about what was said. You cannot listen effectively if you are too tired, rushed or if you are not accepting of the person or situation. If one of these conditions exists, ask if you can talk later.

## **Listening Levels**

HOW well do you listen? Listening can be described on three levels, each one deeper than the last. Discuss the following levels with your partner to see how each of you listens to the other.

### **Listening Level One:**

Listening means that when your spouse is talking to you, you are not thinking about what you are going to say when he or she stops talking.

### **Listening Level Two:**

Listening is completely accepting what is being said without judging what is said or how it is said.

### **Listening Level Three:**

Listening is being able to repeat back to your spouse what he or she said, and what he or she was feeling.

## **Re-establishing Intimacy**

DURING separation, most military couples face the question, “How can two people work together toward achieving intimacy when one of them is absent from the relationship for extended periods?” Military couples often find that reunion may bring out feelings of awkwardness and that their personal relationships are strained. Through an understanding of the effects of separation, you can better cope with the stress that accompanies reunion. Barriers to intimate communication and sexual relations may include:

- Unrealistic fantasies and expectations;
- Anxieties about engaging in intimacy and sex;
- Fear that your partner has become a stranger;
- Feelings of anger, hostility, stress or negative feelings about the separation;
- Concern about faithfulness to your relationship;
- Feelings that sexual relations need to be rushed to make up for lost time.

Because you’ve been apart from each other and have both grown, it will take time to get to know one another again. Partners shouldn’t anticipate “normal” sexual relations for a few days, and should remember that communication will help bring them closer together. It gives you time to become reacquainted and fosters mutual understanding. Don’t avoid discussing negative feelings and frustrations — admitting them may help put them to rest.

Fear of losing your partner plays a major role in developing negative feelings. Listen carefully to what your partner is saying. If you have concerns about fidelity, talk to your chaplain or find a counselor to help you work through these feelings.

## Helping Children Adjust

### **Birth to 1 Year**

Cries, fusses and pulls away from the parent  
Clings to the parent or caregiver who stayed behind  
Changes sleeping and eating habits  
Does not recognize the parent

### **1 to 3 Years**

Shyness Clinging  
Does not recognize the parent  
Cries  
Has temper tantrums  
Regresses (no longer toilet trained)

### **3 to 5 Years**

Demonstrates anger  
Acts out to get the parent's attention  
Is demanding  
Feels guilty for making the parent go away  
Talks a lot to bring the parent up to date

### **5 to 12 Years**

Has fears of inadequacy  
Dreads the parent's return because of discipline  
Boasts about the Army and the parent

### **13 to 18 Years**

Is excited  
Feels guilty about not living up to standards  
Is concerned about rules and responsibilities  
Unwilling to change plans to accommodate parent  
Is rebellious

### **Birth to 1 Year**

Hold the baby, and hug him or her a lot  
Bathe and change the baby  
Feed and play with the baby  
Relax and be patient — the baby will warm up

### **1 to 3 Years**

Don't force holding, hugging or kissing  
Give them space  
Give them time to warm up  
Be gentle and fun  
Sit at their level

### **3 to 5 Years**

Listen to them  
Accept their feelings  
Play with them  
Reinforce your love for them  
Ask about interests, from TV to preschool

### **5 to 12 Years**

Review pictures, schoolwork, activities, scrap books  
Praise what they have done  
Try not to criticize

### **13 to 18 Years**

Share what has happened with you  
Listen with undivided attention  
Don't be judgmental  
Respect privacy and friends  
Don't tease about fashion, music

Because children need warm-up time like adults, changes should be gradual. The returning parent should understand that children may initially feel a sense of loyalty to the parent who stayed behind.

Both parents should stay involved in children's education, activities and interests. Ask them about what's going on and support their positive efforts. Most importantly, try to understand how they feel and what they're thinking.

## **Tips for Soldiers**

- Take time to listen and talk to your loved ones. Communication is the basis of a healthy, growing relationship.
- Make separate time for each child and for your spouse. Have a true “family reunion” before taking time alone with your spouse.
- Support the good things your family has done. Show pleasure and interest in how your family has grown.
- Don’t change systems that have been working well. If your spouse has been doing the checkbook, or a teen doing some of the cooking, don’t demand an immediate return to the way things were before.
- Go easy on the discipline. Don’t try to “whip things into shape.” Take some time to understand how your family has changed during separation.
- Remember that romantic conversation can make re-entering intimacy easier. When two people have been separated, it usually takes some time to become relaxed and get reacquainted sexually.
- Take a marital-enrichment assessment.
- Manage your money carefully. It’s exciting to suddenly have money and places to spend it, but spending without planning usually causes trouble later.
- Do not overdo the reunion parties.
- Be prepared to make some adjustments.
- Expect others to be a little resentful. Others usually think of deployment as much more exciting than staying home — whether you think that or not.
- Realize those at home had a difficult time, too.
- Get a checkup at the local medical clinic.

## **Tips for Spouses**

- Avoid a busy schedule. Soldiers often look forward to having fewer demands on them after deployment.
- Plan family time — it helps bring everyone back together.
- Make time to be alone and talk with your spouse or partner.
- Plan special time just for children and the returning parent to get reacquainted.
- Make adjustments slowly. Don’t expect the soldier to do things exactly as before.
- Expect unusual feelings. The soldier may be a little hurt by your success at home. This is natural — everyone likes to feel needed. Remind your spouse that he or she is still loved and needed by the family.
- Discuss the division of family chores after the initial reunion.
- Stick to your financial budget until you have had time to talk about money matters. Understand that the soldier may not remember how much money a family needs.
- Be patient in rebuilding your relationship.



## **Post Traumatic Stress Disorder**

If deployment was to a war zone, natural disaster or urban riots, be alert for Post Traumatic Stress Disorder in the returning soldier. PTSD probably won't go away on its own. Professional help should be sought by those who experience four or more of the following symptoms:

- Depression
- Isolation
- Alienation
- avoidance of feelings
- rage
- anxiety
- sleep disturbances
- intrusive thoughts
- startle responses.

## **Combat Stress**

COMBAT stress is a natural result of heavy mental and emotional work when facing danger in tough conditions. Like physical fatigue and stress, handling combat stress depends on one's level of fitness and training. It can occur quickly or slowly, and it gets better with rest and replenishment. If combat stress does not subside, soldiers should seek medical help.

Common signs of combat stress include:

- Tension headaches, back aches, trembling, fumbling and jumpiness;
- Rapid breathing or pounding heart;
- Upset stomach, vomiting, diarrhea, frequent urination;
- Emptying bowels and bladder at the first sign of danger;
- Fatigue, weariness, distant staring;
- Anxiety, worrying, irritability, swearing, complaining;
- Awakened by bad dreams;
- Grief or guilt;
- Anger at own team, loosing confidence in self or unit.

## **Reunion Stress**

Whether you are a single or a married soldier, a single-parent soldier, a spouse, or a child, you will face certain stressors associated with reunion. Below are some of the normal stressors you may face, along with some hints to help you adjust to the changes in your life.

### **Stressors**

- Emotional letdown
- Restlessness or sleeplessness
- No one understands what I have been through.
- Was my spouse faithful?
- Did my spouse miss me?
- My friends seem different.
- I didn't expect things to change.
- Other people's concerns seem petty.
- I feel like a stranger at home.
- How will the children react?
- Will the role I have filled change?
- Were my children treated well by their guardian?
- Can I make up for lost time?
- Did I handle things the right way?
- When will things feel normal again?
- I am concerned about finances.
- I am concerned about future deployments.
- The children appear confused and uncertain.

### **Helpful Hints**

- Accept that things may be different.
- Talk about your experiences.
- Go slowly—don't try to make up for lost time.
- Spend quality time with your children.
- Reassure your children. Change often frightens them.
- Curb your desire to take control or to spend money.
- Accept that your partner may be different.
- Intimate relationships may be awkward at first.
- Take time to get reacquainted.
- Forget your fantasies. Reality may be quite different.
- Take time to readjust.
- Communicate with your partner and your family.

## More Resources

**Deployment Cycle Support Concept Plan** — Outlines the responsibilities of Army leaders in helping soldiers reintegrate into their home stations. Includes a risk-reduction tip card. Go to [www.armyg1.army.mil/default.asp?pageid=101f](http://www.armyg1.army.mil/default.asp?pageid=101f).

**Soldier and Family Support Center** — ACS is the principal source of family readiness for the Army on or near installations. Among the services provided are financial-management assistance, the Exceptional Family Member Program, child-support services, family advocacy and relocation services. Go to [www.armycommunityservice.org](http://www.armycommunityservice.org).

**Operation Ready** — A curriculum of family readiness training materials that is available at soldier and family support centers on most installations. Includes training modules, videotapes, resource books and children's materials designed to help soldiers and their families cope with the financial demands of deployment and reunion. The curriculum includes the following training modules and reference materials:

- Army Family Readiness Handbook;
- Army Leaders' Desk Reference for Soldier and Family Readiness;
- Soldier and Family Deployment Survival Handbook;
- Army Family Readiness Group Leader's Handbook;
- Family Assistance Center;
- Predeployment and Ongoing Readiness;
- Homecoming and Reunion.

Materials are distributed in hard copy and on CDROM. They are also available through the Soldier and Family Support Web site.

**Family Assistance Center** — FACs may be established on and off Army installations during periods of lengthy deployment. They provide assistance and information on such matters as financial counseling and family support.

**Rear Detachment** — Units may create rear detachments when deployed for extended periods. It is the primary point of contact for family members who have questions or who need assistance during separations.

**Family Readiness Group** — The FRG is a command-sponsored organization of family members, volunteers and unit soldiers who provide mutual support and assistance. FRGs help create a network of communication among family members, the chain of command and community resources.

**Chaplains** — Chaplains are a good source for confidential counseling to individuals and families.

**Hooah 4 Health** — Sponsored by the U.S. Army Office of the Surgeon General and the U.S. Army Center for Health Promotion and Preventive Medicine, this Web site offers information about postdeployment health. Go to [www.hooah4health.com](http://www.hooah4health.com).

**Social Work Services** — Provides marriage, family and individual counseling; crisis intervention; counseling for victims of sexual assault; and family advocacy services. Social work services are available on most installations.

**Equality in Marriage Institute** — Offers tips for managing relationships during and after war. Go to [www.equalityinmarriage.org/d/News/headlines.html](http://www.equalityinmarriage.org/d/News/headlines.html).